

**Focus Falls on a Reluctant Warrior:  
A Behind the Scenes Player for Years, Waxman Sees It His Duty to Publicly  
Criticize Bush**  
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By Juliet Eilperin

Rep. Henry Waxman doesn't seem a likely candidate for media stardom. The 61 year old California Democrat, who measures just under 5 1/2 feet tall and has less hair than when he first won federal office in 1974, is better known for his mastery of legislative arcana than for flashy suits or sound bites. But lately, Waxman, who as the top Democrat on the House Government Reform Committee watches over the Bush administration, has been making news on practically a daily basis.

One day he's prodding Vice President Cheney to reveal the identities of the nongovernmental officials who helped the White House craft its energy policy. The next day he's bestowing a "golden jackpot" award on the administration for loosening arsenic level standards for public drinking water. Last month, his staff released a report on abuses in nursing homes that led the "CBS Evening News" that day.

Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), a Waxman ally for more than 40 years, said his colleague has figured out how to draw attention to GOP policies rather than to himself. "He's not getting publicity because he has worked out some really cute phrase or because he's pulling some stunt," said Berman, who first became friends with Waxman in 1960 when they belonged to UCLA's Young Democrats. "He is simply making the media part of his strategy for raising the issue."

Waxman didn't always spend as much time in the limelight. For much of his political career, he excelled by working behind the scenes, hammering out budget deals in closed meetings and building up a formidable political organization in his hometown that handpicked candidates and became known as "the Waxman Berman machine."

The foyer to Waxman's Rayburn office, covered with framed copies of bills he helped usher into law, is testimony to those heady days. There are eight of them, bearing the signatures of every president from Jimmy Carter to Bill Clinton.

But after Democrats lost the House in 1994, Waxman had little choice but to trade his inside game for a more public one. No longer could he bully Republicans from his committee perch, expand Medicaid coverage for poor children or haul tobacco executives in to testify under oath on the health hazards associated with smoking. Instead, he was stuck decrying the Republicans' endless probes of the Clinton administration.

But now that President Bush and his crew have taken over, Waxman has appeared positively liberated in his new role, questioning why Cheney has kept the membership of his energy task force secret and pressing for details on talks that White House senior adviser Karl Rove had with companies in which he had more than \$100,000 of stock. In both instances, Waxman has been rebuffed, though the General Accounting Office is threatening to go to court to force Cheney to release the names of his outside advisers.

Rep. Mark Edward Souder (R-Ind.), who sits on Government Reform, said Waxman's strength lies in the fact that unlike some of his GOP counterparts he "rarely overreaches."

"I believe he's a good, decent partisan, which of course means he's going to be a nightmare for the Bush administration," Souder said, adding that Waxman repeatedly undercut committee Republicans during

their investigations of Clinton. "We would develop a complicated case, and he would find a hole and exploit that with a very mediasavvy approach."

Waxman, for his part, describes himself as a reluctant warrior. "I'm doing what I think I ought to be doing," he said in a recent interview. "It's not what I'd like to be doing."

This behavior has not, of course, endeared Waxman to the White House. Mary Matalin, counselor to the vice president, even suggested that Democrats had resorted to "the politics of personal destruction" in an effort to seek retribution for the indignities Clinton suffered at the hands of the Republicans.

Waxman said he understood why Bush officials were resisting his efforts so fiercely. "Most administrations would like to operate on their own and have no scrutiny. That's not unique to Republicans," he said. "But I think it's important for Congress institutionally, in a system of checks and balances, to exercise our oversight power."

But for every irate Republican, there is a grateful Democrat whom Waxman has deftly aided in spite of his minority status. In 1998, Waxman created a special investigations division on his staff to issue reports for individual Democrats on issues such as prescription drug prices for seniors and the problem of burgeoning classroom sizes. The 300 studies have served as potent political tools outside the Beltway.

Oklahoma freshman Rep. Brad Carson is one of the most conservative members of the Democratic Caucus, but he has only praise for Waxman for commissioning a report on the shoddy record of nursing homes in his state. "It's really become my signature issue in Oklahoma," Carson said. "Issues just don't arise spontaneously in the public consciousness. There has to be months, even years of laying the groundwork."

And while Republicans might hope Waxman will give up the fight in the near future, he seems happy to spend the months and years it might take for his party to regain the majority. Friends such as Democratic Reps. Edward Markey (Mass.) and George Miller (Calif.) say much of Waxman's success lies in simply wearing down the opposition.

"You're talking about the most stubborn S.O.B. in the place," said Miller. "He is the last person to leave the room."